

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
June 12, 1997

Contact: Cherie Simon
202-682-5570

Office of Communications
The Nancy Hanks Center
1100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20506
202/682-5570
Fax 202/682-5611

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS ANNOUNCES HIGHEST HONORS IN FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTISTS

Washington, D.C. -- Eleven master artists have been selected to receive 1997 **National Heritage Fellowships** -- the National Endowment for the Arts' most prestigious honor in folk and traditional arts. Among those chosen are two Tennessee Bluegrass musicians, a Cajun weaver from Louisiana, a West Coast Blues musician who influenced Nat King Cole and Ray Charles, and a *santero* carver from Santa Fe. Each a guardian of a generations-old folk art representing many threads of America's cultural fabric, the Heritage Fellows hail from rural and urban communities in eight different states. The Fellowships include a one-time award of \$10,000 and honor achievements as artists, teachers, innovators, and keepers of traditional art forms. Since 1982, the Arts Endowment has awarded over 200 National Heritage Fellowships. An awards ceremony and concert will be held during September 1997 in Washington, D.C.

"Our highest honor in the folk and traditional arts recognizes masters whose extraordinary talents spring from the heart of home and community. With vision and dedication, these individuals pass skills from generation to generation -- bringing new life to invaluable traditions, and shaping a nation where our differences become our strength," said Jane Alexander, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The 1997 National Heritage Fellowship recipients are:

- Edward Babb ("Shout" Band Gospel Musician, Trombonist & Band Leader -- Jamaica, New York)
- Charles Brown -- (West Coast Blues Pianist, Vocalist & Composer -- Berkeley, California)
- Gladys LeBlanc Clark (Cajun Spinner & Weaver -- Duson, Louisiana)
- Wenyi HUA (Chinese Kunqu Opera Singer -- Arcadia, California)
- Ali Akbar Khan (North Indian Sarod Player & Raga Composer -- San Anselmo, California)
- Ramón José López (Santero & Metalsmith -- Santa Fe, New Mexico)
- Jim and Jesse McReynolds (Bluegrass Musicians -- Gallatin, Tennessee)
- Phong Nguyen (Vietnamese Musician & Scholar -- Kent, Ohio)
- Hystercine Rankin (African American Quilter -- Lorman, Mississippi)
- Francis Whitaker (Blacksmith/Ornamental Ironworker -- Carbondale, Colorado)

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NATIONAL HERITAGE FELLOWSHIPS 1997, BIOGRAPHIES

Edward Babb ("Shout" Band Gospel Musician, Trombonist, Band Leader --

Jamaica, New York) is an early creator of a musical tradition called the "shout band," a unique and vibrant style combining instrumental jazz with gospel hymns. As the trombone-playing director of The McCollough Sons of Thunder Brass Band and musical model of his community, Elder Babb has energized the worship services of Harlem's United House of Prayer for nearly three-decades, taking time out to accept a "Legends of Leaders" award from his church and to grace the stage at Carnegie Hall.

Charles Brown -- (West Coast Blues Pianist, Vocalist & Composer -- Berkeley, California) is among the foremost inventors of the sophisticated yet relaxed West Coast blues style which influenced such greats as Ray Charles and Nat King Cole. With The Three Blazers in 1944, Brown recorded the classics "Driftin' Blues," "Merry Christmas Baby," and "Sunny Road." He later toured with Fats Domino, Bill Doggett, and Roy Brown. Recently, acclaim has returned to him through a PBS profile in "That Rhythm . . . Those Blues," a 1987 "comeback" recording *One More for the Road*, and a 1995 headline spot on the nationally broadcast "American Roots Fourth of July" radio concert. In 1997, he was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Blues Hall of Fame.

Gladys LeBlanc Clark (Acadian [Cajun] Spinner & Weaver -- Duson, Louisiana) is a deeply traditional inheritor and guardian of the cherished and distinctive art of Acadian or Cajun weaving. Clark's family -- her mother, aunt, grandmother, and great-grandmother -- were all spinners and weavers. Throughout her life, Clark has grown, picked, seeded, carded, spun, and woven cotton on her farm. She is a master teacher, who has demonstrated her craft throughout Louisiana and, in 1996, was honored with the Acadian Folk Heritage Award.

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Ali Akbar Khan (North Indian Sarod Player & Raga Composer -- San Anselmo, California) is a master of the *sarod*, a 25-string lute-like instrument. With a family musical history dating to the 16th century court of Akbar, the North Indian Moghul Emperor, he trained with his father -- who also taught the great sitarist Ravi Shankar -- and his uncle for 20 years, practicing 18 hours a day. His fame has led to recordings and annual worldwide tours with stops at Carnegie Hall, Tokyo's East-West Encounter, and the Monterey Jazz Festival. The Ali Akbar College of Music he founded in 1967 now has trained 7,000 devotees. His prestigious honors include the President of India Award and a MacArthur Foundation genius grant.

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Ramón José López (Santero & Metalsmith -- Santa Fe, New Mexico) is an exceptional creator of contemporary sacred images, renowned for his skill, versatility, and dedication to the rich Hispanic traditions which flourished in the Southwest. Using tools that belonged to his *santero* grandfather, López carves exquisite wooden icons, paints colorful altar screens, and forges intricate silver jewelry, candlesticks, and chalices. López is an innovator within tradition whose work has earned Santa Fe's Spanish Colonial Market's Grand Prize and can be found in The Albuquerque Museum, the New Mexico State Capitol, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Jim and Jesse McReynolds (Bluegrass Musicians -- Gallatin, Tennessee) took the longstanding vocal duet, close-harmony style of Bluegrass music to new levels. Born two years apart, the brothers were part of a Virginia family of coal miners and farmers who doubled as accomplished members of popular local string bands. Although their careers were disrupted when Jim served in World War II and Jesse in the Korean War, Jim returned to the guitar, and Jesse began developing new techniques for mandolin. In the 1950s, the two roamed from radio station to radio station, winning contests, and developing a faithful following. Their big break came in 1964, when they joined the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, where they have remained for 33 years.

Phong Nguyen [FAWNG - N'WIN] (Vietnamese Musician & Scholar -- Kent, Ohio) is the principal guardian of a complex and dynamic Vietnamese musical tradition buffeted by both war and modernity. From age five, he studied music with a village master and became proficient on many instruments, especially strings. He spent a decade learning Buddhist chants, later playing professional Vietnamese theater music, and collecting a rare repertoire of musical material from the mountains and farms. Since resettling in the United States in 1974, he has been performing extensively, recording, and teaching at Kent State University, the University of Washington, and UCLA.

Hystercine Rankin (African American Quilter -- Lorman, Mississippi) learned her quilting from her grandmother at age 12, and vividly demonstrates that many necessary activities are also opportunities to create beauty. At first, she mostly quilted to keep her family warm, but later began designing quilts inspired by important moments in her life. In 1991, Rankin received the state of Mississippi's highest award in the arts, the Susan B. Herron Fellowship. She has been the master quilter and teacher at Mississippi Cultural Crossroads since 1988, exhibited at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife in 1996, and has been featured in numerous publications.

Francis Whitaker (Blacksmith/Ornamental Ironworker -- Carbondale, Colorado), known as "the dean of American blacksmiths," has done more than any other to strengthen the ties of tradition among U.S. blacksmiths. Born in Woburn, Massachusetts in 1906, at age 16 he apprenticed in Philadelphia with Samuel Yellin, the premier ornamental blacksmith of the day, and later worked in Berlin with the German master Julius Schramm. In 1933, he opened his own shop in Carmel, California where, despite the Depression, the Spanish Revival in design made work plentiful. In 1963, he moved his shop to Aspen, Colorado, later founding the Francis Whitaker Blacksmith Schools, and earning the 1995 Colorado Governor's Award for Excellence in Arts. Now celebrating 75 years or three quarters of a century in blacksmithing, Whitaker's career is marked by an iron-willed dedication to excellence.